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ABSTRACT

In educational research the problem of student description is eternal. On what basis do researchers make decisions about aspects of students' material lives to count as data, interpretive categories, contextual information, results? This paper focuses specifically on the problem of "background" in researching the student subject. The paper argues that young people's life-worlds and experiences are by no means "background" in their access to and take up of educational provision and school literacies, and that indeed there is a substantial case to be made in foregrounding student and school differences as research is conducted about new literate practices in new times. While "background" is used across research paradigms and approaches, the paper argues that the word (with its attendant abstract adjectives) may unleash powerful, at time dangerous, effects in educational sites, and that it is increasingly problematic in terms of what it implies about students' (and teachers') lifeworlds and subjectivities. The paper aims to open up a discussion about a specific discursive practice--the use of "background"--and to consider its effects in actual sites and to explore possible alternatives. Through an analysis of teachers' descriptions of their students, it discusses the limits and the dangers of employing "background" as a construct in these times, and it turns briefly to recent and current "naming" dilemmas to be faced in working with teachers and students in schools serving poor communities. (Contains 8 notes and 37 references.) (NKA)

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Problematising 'background': (Re) Constructing Categories in Educational Research

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Introduction: Inscribing Disadvantage?

In educational research the problem of student description is eternal. What must a researcher say about students in order to provide what the reader needs to know? What 'background' becomes fore-grounded in contextualising the research story? How can the 'characters' be introduced without reducing them to statistics, categories, exotics or stereotypes? On what basis do researchers make decisions about aspects of students' material lives to count as data, interpretive categories, contextual information, results? These questions are not new, of course. But it is important, nonetheless, not to let them slip off the agenda, or become somehow taken-for-granted. My aim here is to re-examine these questions through a consideration of how the keyword 'background' functions in educational discourse. Further, if we are indeed living in 'New Times', characterised by media culture and communication and information technologies, global economies and migration, increasing gaps between rich and poor, how might these questions relate to contemporary research about young people, literacy and the production of educational disadvantage?

As we research such questions, what and how can we learn from history which might help us in the ever-changing present to trouble-shoot and to design ethical research and educational programs which inform today's educators?[1] We know that some groups are likely to achieve a competitive edge when it comes to schooling and the inheritance of canonical literacies, and that living in poverty increases the likelihood of low levels of literacy performance on mainstream literacy assessments. Writing about the 'institutional abandonment' of schools in the Chicago ghetto, Wacquant (1994) warns of new forms of stratification of public schooling by race and income, and powerfully describes the consequences. Schools in the ghetto:

> have in effect been reduced to *custodial* rather than educational facilities that serve more to ensnare the poor than to open an escape hatch out of the ghetto.... Today's inner-city children attend class in establishments whose student body is generally entirely minority and over 80 percent from families living below the poverty line. They are educated in the oldest, most over-crowded facilities, in larger classes led by teachers trained in the least selective colleges, and with fewer counselors than either suburban or private city schools. (Wacquant 1994, 261-262, emphasis in original).

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[1] See also Cormack this volume.

Wacquant goes on to detail a school without a library, basketball courts without hoops, playgrounds with broken glass, and teachers who 'come from the outside and rarely venture into the community for fear of crime', a growing phenomenon, that Allan Luke has described as 'commuter teachers'[2].

In Australia, educational researchers have noted the difficult conditions of teachers' work in disadvantaged schools (Connell et al. 1991; Comber 1996; Hatton 1988) and recent work suggests that the pressures on teachers are escalating as children and their families deal with the effects of poverty and unemployment (Thomson 1998), whilst living in an increasingly multi-mediated world which continues to flaunt the lifestyles of the rich, privileged and famous. We know from history that the poor and minority communities were not only more likely to have less access to educational resources, such as books and libraries, but that they were more likely to be given other people's discards – out-of-print basal readers, or out-of-date encyclopaedias. Of course, such charitable recycling was often prompted by the best of intentions, and many poorly resourced teachers and students may have been very glad to receive these materials; but the point is that educators to be vigilant in these changing times about the authorisation of 'hand-me-down' or discarded literacies for socio-economically disadvantaged children.

Recent inclusions from *The Advertiser* newspaper in South Australia make stark the differences in the going-to-school experiences of rich and poor children and how their families relate to schooling. In one example, an advertisement for a private school notes that the use of a lap-top computer is necessary from Year Seven enrolment and upwards (*The Advertiser*, March 8, 1997, p.16) and indeed, in some of the more exclusive private schools enrolment may be contingent on parents providing a specified laptop computer for each of their children. In a very different example, a story entitled, '3000 children may lose School Cards' (Lloyd, June 27, 1996, p. 2) reports that some poor families are receiving benefits which they don't deserve, such as Health Card and School Card (which give low-income people access to benefits and reductions of health education, local travel costs etc). A cartoon, dealing with same issue several months earlier when the problem was first announced, depicts two children discussing the 'school card

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[2]Luke, A. 'The Literacy Debate in Perspective', presentation to the Poverty, Literacy and Education Conference, August 1996, video available from DETE, Commonwealth Literacy Team, Fulham Gardens Curriculum Unit, Marlborough St Henley Beach 5022

rorts crackdown'. One remarks, 'My Dad reckons that's what the 3Rs mean... reading, rorting and 'rithmatic!' [sic] (Atchison, *The Advertiser*, January 3, 1998, p.12). Early in 1998 a front page news story by the court reporter (Owen-Brown, *The Advertiser*, March 28, 1998, p.1) repeats the theme of low income people taking advantage of the public school system with an article about a northern suburbs school taking a family to court for failure to pay school fees. The article is titled, 'School sues family over unpaid fees', and is complete with the 'offending' family photographed outside the school grounds with the school sign clearly visible behind them. Just below and nested within the same frame is a sub-head which reads, 'One in five students fail writing trial - Page 2'. This journalism puts together literacy, poverty and public schooling together in ways which simultaneously blame both the poor and the public school system, whilst supporting the achievements and the exclusivity of the private schools (see also Comber 1996 and Green, Hodgens & Luke 1994).

Problematising 'Background'

What have these issues got to do with educational research, with new kids, new times, new literacy, and also with my specific focus in this paper, the problem of *background* in researching the student subject? I argue that young people's life-worlds and experiences are by no means 'background' in their access to and take up of educational provision and school literacies, and that indeed there is a substantial case to be made in fore-grounding student and school differences as we research new literate practices in new times (Hill et al., 1998).

In educational research and policy, student populations are frequently described in terms of their socio-economic *background*, family *background*, poor *background*, cultural *background*, minority *background*, linguistic *background*, and so on. This word is part of a systematic practice in educational and sociological research discourses, which define what counts as significant in knowing the student subject and in interpreting research findings. 'Cultural background' and 'family background' are commonly used data-base descriptors on ERIC. Significantly, 'background' is used across research paradigms and approaches. While it may appear a neutral or even empty signifier, I argue that the word (with its attendant abstract adjectives) may unleash powerful, and at times dangerous, effects in educational sites,

and that it is increasingly problematic in terms of what it implies about students' (and teachers'[3]) lifeworlds and subjectivities.

Background first became a descriptor in July 1966. The 'scope note' or usage definition reads:

> Sum of the regular and persistent influences (experiences, conditions, circumstances, events, etc.) contributing to the present development or characteristics of an individual, group or organization)... (*Thesaurus of ERIC Descriptors*, p.28)

The list of 'narrower terms' includes cultural background, educational background, experience, parent background, socioeconomic background, teacher background, and 'related terms' include (amongst others) biographical inventories, credentials, environment, history, individual differences, influences, opportunities, reputation. This definition and related terms suggests the polysemous nature of the word 'background'. Either with an adjectival partner, or on its own, it can be used to signify history, current life conditions, knowledge, class and cultural practices, status, and so on.

My contention here is that the use of this term needs serious consideration, both in terms of what it implies and what it leaves unsaid. Poststructuralist and postcolonial arguments for retheorising identity in terms of multiple subjectivities and hybridity contest essentialist representations of people as individuals, groups or populations, yet the vocabularies of educational research frequently function as though the dynamic and complex were simply static backdrops (Bhabha 1994; Fine & Weiss, 1996; Seddon, 1995). 'Background', ironically, is often the collective term for what is *most* central and dynamic in the lives of the 'researched'. For instance, children's families, homes and cultures are hardly 'background'. Poverty is not something neatly left outside the school gate. A person's history is inscribed in the body – 'right in the very heart of the "subject"' – in what Bourdieu calls the 'habitus' (Bourdieu 1990, p.15). However as educational researchers we face many dilemmas in writing in (and out) the lived realities of people's lives (Fine & Weiss, 1996).

It is the institutional practices of schools and research organisations which constitute children's families, lifeworlds and experiences as 'background'. The

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[3]While the examples in this paper focus largely on students, similar questions pertain to descriptions of teachers in educational research.

take-up of 'background' perhaps signifies its usefulness as a generic descriptor for what it is so difficult to describe in non-reductive ways. Yet, as Carmen and Allan Luke point out, '[j]ust as there is no generic subject in new times, there is no generic family' (Luke & Luke 1998, p.750).

'Background' may therefore be seen as symptomatic of counter-productive educational discourses which fail to explain dynamic and changing educational conditions and student populations. Bourdieu argues that the 'classificatory mode of functioning of academic and political thought' ... 'hamstrings intellectual inventiveness'. Specifically, he writes: 'The logic of the classificatory label is very exactly that of racism, which stigmatises its vicitims by imprisoning them in a negative essence' (Bourdieu 1990, p. 28). The aim of this paper is to open up a discussion about a specific discursive practice – the use of 'background' – and to consider its effects in actual sites and to explore possible alternatives. Through an analysis of teachers' descriptions of their students, I discuss the limits and the dangers of employing 'background' as a construct in these times, and I turn briefly to recent and current 'naming' dilemmas to be faced in working with teachers and students in schools serving poor communities.[4]

As a researcher with a particular commitment to working in what used to be known as 'the disadvantaged schools'[5], my projects frequently involve teachers talking about their students, many of whom are living in relative poverty. With reference to particular data and problems, I want to discuss here how I came to see the word 'background' as dangerous, and as needing to be problematised, in order to build more productive ways of portraying students, their lifeworlds and histories. Starting with Foucult's insight that discourses are constitutive, I point to some potential effects of the discourses in which 'background' is both central and yet sinister in its unobtrusiveness.

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[4]While this paper does draw on a number of research studies, both completed and in process, the aim is to raise ethical and methodological questions here, rather than to report a particular investigation.

[5] The Commonwealth Disadvantaged Schools Program concluded in 1996, which can now be seen, perhaps, as the end of an era in terms of social justice being a key criteria in the dispersal of funds (Rizvi, 1995).

Deficit discourses and Teacher Expectations

In a recent national survey of literacy and language practices of teachers in the early years of schooling in disadvantaged schools, teachers explained children did not meet their expectations for literacy performance due to their 'home background' or 'family background' (Badger et al., 1993). When asked, ' What do you think are the most important things teachers need to know about teaching literacy in disadvantaged schools?', teachers continually invoked students' 'backgrounds' as generally problematic and as causal of academic difficulties.

For instance, teachers wrote statements typified by those below:

> Many children have a literacy deprived background.
>
> Need to be aware that a poor socio-economic background can be [sic] a marked effect on literacy development. That children from these types of backgrounds need a great deal of immersion in stories, discussions, shared experiences. That there might not always be a backup from parental supervision etc of reading etc at home....That children in disadvantaged schools have very limited experiences and need exposure to a wide variety of first hand experiences and books.
>
> The cultural and socio-economic background of their children. Books and learning are not always a high priority for families who are suffering financial or personal stress... Children who are happy have a headstart to literacy.

We identified a pervasive deficit discourse about children in disadvantaged schools consistent with findings of other researchers concerned with poverty and education. This discourse constitutes poor children and their families as blamable (Freebody et al. 1995; Polakow 1993). Frequently missing in these accounts were references to the physical effects of poverty. The mention of 'financial and personal stress' in the last quotation above was one of a small number of allusions to the material realities of socio-economic disadvantage. Yet in this case, too, the teacher's conclusion that 'happy children have a headstart to literacy' could be read as offering a psychological solution to an economic issue. The danger with these explanations is that they locate educational problems with literacy learning *within* the child or the child's home and *away* from structural and institutional practices, and in the process often obscure the material effects of poverty. Paradoxically, 'background', as these teachers name it, deflects attention away from children's actual lives and paves the way for a stereotyping of children's home lives that is based on the logic and rhetoric of deficits (see also Comber, 1997).

My intention is not to blame teachers, but to explore how deficit discourses are circulated and reproduced in the wider educational and research community. Teachers do not create such explanations in a vacuum. As Freebody (1992) argues, this approach - which he describes as 'backyarding' - is also evident in educational research reports which avoid dealing with social class by referring to the 'cultural-intellectual environment of the home' (Freebody & Welch 1993, p.217). According to Freebody, educational researchers have, all too often, constituted uneven literacy achievement along class lines as 'a problem of motivation and parental encouragement' (Freebody 1992, p.74). Recent moves to poststructuralist 'discourses of difference' have concomitant dangers of 'eclipsing class' from research (Coole 1996; Skeggs, 1997).

At this point, let me summarise how 'home background' works as a dangerous descriptor in the case of literacy education research. Researchers have developed explanations for poor literacy performance as correlated with the 'home', but such explanations frequently dismiss 'class' as a key variable and frequently avoid discussions of poverty altogether. Media, policy and professional development texts taking up such accounts are distributed widely to teachers and thus become available to teachers in accounting for students' differential performance and in laying the responsibility at the family door. These reasoning practices can become part of the public common sense, and at times the folklore of disadvantaged school teaching communities, with dire consequences for curriculum provision and pedagogy, shaping lower or different teacher expectations of children with problematic 'home' or 'family backgrounds'. One teacher explained it like this: 'Children's level of oracy [speaking in English] will be low. Be prepared for children not to understand you. Be prepared to make everything simple'.

Deficit constructions of the student have curriculum and assessment consequences (Comber 1997). It becomes evident how educational failure is produced as a circular accomplishment, starting and finishing with family backgrounds. In these excerpts and others from the survey, teachers wrote of students' home backgrounds as 'lacking', 'limited', 'non-stimulating', 'deprived', characterising 'these children' as 'deficit' (see also Luke 1997). How these explanations move across educational and media sites is a complex and contradictory process (Bessant 1993, 1995a, 1995b; Luke & Luke 1995), warranting further investigation.

A complicating factor in working against deficit explanations is that standardised measures of literacy assessment continue to demonstrate that socio-economic disadvantage statistically increases students' chances of low performance. Put another way, schooling continues to result in differential performance, such that more privileged students are more likely to be assessed in the higher range. The continuing dilemma here is how to reformulate such findings as a product of societal inequities which impact on the micro-politics of everyday practices in schools.

Hence my intention here is not to overestimate the importance of the word 'background' itself. Rather, I use the case of 'background' as an illustrative example of how discursive practices of the educational research community have effects in particular local sites, and to point to the need for educational researchers to consider the effects of their own textual practices[6]. For instance, if our research is indeed motivated by social justice how might we foreground material disadvantage *without* unleashing normative moral discourses which pathologise disadvantaged communities and reduce children to amalgams of categories?

'Family background', 'these kids', and the epidemiology of the family

The survey study reported above generated a number of worrying questions which I took with me into the research I undertook for my doctoral thesis and to which I now refer. I did not resolve these questions in the thesis, but I was able to continue to examine these preoccupations in the light of more extended and located ethnographic work[7]. In this project I was interested in understanding the work of literacy educators in a disadvantaged school community, (which I call Banfield), how they thought about their students, and how they conceptualised literacy and produced enacted everyday curriculum and pedagogical practices in the institutional context.

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[6] See also Seddon (1995) for a discussion of the construct 'context' in everyday educational talk and research.

[7] The work discussed in this section was part of my doctoral dissertation, 'The discursive construction of literacy in a disadvantaged school', unpublished PhD thesis James Cook University, 1996. This study involved participant observation in one school during staff meetings, on planning days, and in each of the classrooms in literacy lessons over an eighteen month period.

As Foucault (1979) demonstrated, modern institutions manage the population in a capillary fashion, exercising power over individuals through the local management of time and space, surveillance and examination. In modern societies institutions monitor, classify and record. Individuals and groups classified as deviating from the norm are the subjects of intense study. Schools as 'nurseries of the population' (Foucault, cited in Smart 1983, p.93) have an important function in regulating and monitoring children. Teachers are required to 'know' their students.

In a disadvantaged school, as well as the official ways of knowing, individual teachers bring to bear their discursive and cultural resources in coming to 'know' their students. What counts as relevant information and interpretation of that information relates to teachers' lifeworlds. In other words, teachers construct versions of normality, grids of specification, which are used to assess each student. As well as educational discourses, adjacent discourses, such as psychological, religious, legal, medical, are deployed in knowing students. In telling me about their students, teachers commonly referred to 'these kids' and their 'backgrounds'.

'These kids' is a label used more widely than at this school, or course, to refer to groups of children who are somehow marked out in ways that might be variously defined in different localities. Where schools are concerned, 'these kids' usually refers to groups who are seen to be problematic or different from 'normal' kids. As I have shown above, in regard to children in schools serving communities living in poverty, often the sentences begin 'these kids need'; 'these kids lack'; 'these kids cannot' (Badger et al. 1994), thereby constructing a deficit discourse. At this point I want to explore how the disadvantaged child is constituted in Banfield teachers' talk about 'these kids' and their 'backgrounds'.

Most teachers expressed concern, shock and surprise at students' home circumstances and histories. There was, often, a prevailing sense of a diseased society, an epidemic of chaos caused by non-functional families. Teachers expressed anxiety about drug-related illnesses, alcoholism, parents breaking up and forming new relationships, physical abuse, lack of physical cleanliness and general disorder or chaos. The clean, well-organised, healthy nuclear family was the standard by which other families were judged. Poverty and unemployment were rarely mentioned in teachers' explanations of family

breakdown. Parents' relationships, behaviours and habits were seen as causal of children's difficulties. Explanations of children's problems were made alongside the disintegration of families. For example, in one teacher's view, absences from school were related to, but not excused by, a parent's drug habit:

> M was a heroin baby and she's got some liver problem but that doesn't, she shouldn't be away as much as she is; she was away thirty days this term, almost six weeks out of a ten week term.

Here the social and physical reality of the child's life intrudes into school practices. Illness, or former illness, should not prevent 'the child' becoming 'the student'. The educational discourse dominates and excludes the physical realities, which are dismissed as the result of family deviance (Brodkey 1992).

Before observing in the classrooms, I asked each teacher to tell me about their students. In these accounts parents feature regularly. Parents' life crises were seen as generating problems which their children had to adapt to. Parents who were 'off their heads' with traumas were contrasted with those who were 'stable':

> You know it's completely muddled up. Things like access weekends are a conflict upon conflict.
>
> And P's father's remarried. His father's obviously really intelligent and he's wealthy. And then there's B [the mother] who looks like she came out of the gutter most of the time, you know the one I mean...Yeah totally out of her head and lives with some guy who's totally off his head and they're always on again off again and all that sort of stuff. He lives two completely different lifestyles; one home he's really stable and the other one is really crazy, but he seems to adjust quite well.
>
> So you know her mum is an alcoholic? You know her general sloppiness, sort of mess, have you noticed that?... She's been a bit better about the no shoes and lying on the table and lying on the floor; but she's apparently much better than last year.
>
> Her sister's a bit of a streetwalker, a local [name of suburb] streetwalker, only a young girl and um her mother is a druggie. Her father's very nice and stable and all that but her mother is totally off her head.... She lives with her mother and sister and there the emphasis is on being models. Her mother does interesting photography I'm told.
>
> I went to his birthday party last Friday night and I had the shock of my life.... Well it's obviously a very warm family, like they're a real family and they're just lovely all of them together and I walked in the house and the lack of cleanliness - it's diabolical. It's just like a tip out the back. There's rubbish everywhere and a green swimming pool that the kids are swimming in and they keep mice in the bathroom. Yes it just stinks and the house is really grotty and it looks as though it hasn't been washed.

> Thirty six per cent of Australians are in a situation of some kind of abuse *whether it is just verbal, or domestic violence of some kind.* I've thought that actually means that one in every three of my children are in that situation and I started to look at it in, sort of compassion. I started to think about, I was feeling less abused by it.
>
> I also discovered that children's ability to live in a community was fragile.

In these statements, teachers construct the community as a threatening and chaotic place. The deviant parent is described as 'off her head', 'crazy', 'out of the gutter', 'an alcoholic', 'a druggie'. Family situations are described as muddled, conflict upon conflict, situations of abuse and domestic violence. Houses are described in terms of lack of cleanliness – 'like a tip', 'grotty', 'diabolical'. In contrast, stable parents are described as intelligent and wealthy. Students from the deviant families are described in terms of no shoes, lying on the table and lying on the floor, fragile. When students' family lives deviate from the norms, legal, religious and psychological discourses are employed by teachers in knowing and naming the problem (Tyler 1993). The teacher gaze misses little; the smells, the mice in the bathroom, the green pool, the gossip about other family members and their perceived transgressions: streetwalkers, alcoholics, druggies, child abusers. These are the children who come from an 'other' world, an 'other' lifestyle, which impinges on teachers' work in producing proper students.

In these examples, mothers are particular targets, in a way that is comparable to what Polakow has referred to as the characterisation of 'incomplete mothers', in her study of single American mothers and their families living in poverty (Polakow 1993, p. 48). For the disintegration of the family and the cleanliness of the house, mothers are held responsible. These mothers, these deviant mothers, are off their heads, living with non-husbands, who are also off their heads, alcoholics, druggies, doing 'interesting photography', not cleaning their houses, not protecting their children from streetwalking, abuse and violence. Even the mother who manages 'a very warm family, like they're a real family and they're just lovely all of them together', is indicted for her lack of cleanliness, a potential threat to the children's health. Mothers are required to display a repertoire of responsible practices in the construction of the stable family home. Blame for chaos is laid at the mothers' feet (see also Walkerdine 1990). The construction of the deviant mother is informed by ideologies of tidy houses and healthy, happy, stable families.

Class, gender, religious, legal, medical discourses are assembled in constituting her world as chaotic, as other, and most importantly as dangerous to her children. The child who lives part-time with his stable father seems to 'adjust quite well', but where there is no such stabilising force children are characterised by a general sloppiness, and as at risk of prostitution, drug addiction and violence. The school then comes to be a site of the 'professional surveillance of the family' (Waitzkin 1991, p.82). Sometimes this results in children and their 'family backgrounds' being written off in deficit terms, and research and populist revisions in the press play a part in teachers' formulations of 'these kids' in their 'other worlds'. For instance, as I discuss further below, one teacher's reading of a media article on child abuse leads her to generalise the reported percentages in the population to her own classroom. This move allows her to reconstruct her response to deviant behaviour exhibited by the children to one of compassion and privilege rather than abuse. Her Catholicism reframes the problem as children to be saved from an evil community.

I do not suggest that all teachers spoke in these ways about students, nor that these teachers always spoke in these ways. Some teachers tended to say very little about students. Several teachers apologised for what they were saying, but explained that I had asked them to tell me 'the way it was'. And of course, sheer physical hardship, violence, poor health, drugs, prostitution, family breakdown *did* impact on the lives of the children they taught, and *did* impact on their work as teachers and as administrators. That *was* the the way it *was*. My being there perhaps invited bad news stories and moral evaluations from these teachers. As a researcher, it may be that I was unwittingly complicit in producing this kind of talk by providing the space to say what could not be said at school (Carspecken & Apple 1992). I was there to learn about their 'context'. They told me about what they found problematic. As Fine and Weiss (1996) discuss, it is not obvious what to do with 'bad data', where informants (in good faith, as a part of the research contract) give researchers views of the world which conflict with the researchers' ethics and intentions and also expose themselves in risky ways.

At Banfield, teachers mentioned that the way they spoke to me -' like negative comments'- about the students and their families was the object of the Principal's severe disapproval. She overtly discouraged teachers from 'seeing students as deficit' and maintained that labelling children in these ways could

reinforce a cycle of failure. The teachers' perceptions were that 'negative' talk was not allowed in the staff-room or at meetings. How students could be spoken about was, therefore, contested.

In the Principal's view, knowing students' histories and current home circumstances should not interfere with teachers' academic expectations for students:

> The teachers play a vital role in this of course [that is empowerment of students] and they need to have very high expectations of children. They need to believe they have the potential to learn. They need to believe that regardless of what happens in a child's home life it won't influence their capacity to learn. (Principal: interview)

The Principal here analytically separates children's home lives from their potential to learn. Her argument to teachers is that they need to have very high expectations of children, 'that regardless of what happens in a child's home life it won't influence their capacity to learn'. Thus she constructs the child in the school world as impervious to outside influences – backgrounding 'background'; in effect – in a conscious struggle to contest a 'pedagogy of poverty' (Haberman 1991). This depends, however, on the role teachers play, what teachers believe and the expectations they hold. Here the Principal draws on educational research literature which claims that a key variable in students' school success is teacher expectation. In privileging educational discourses and practices over children's lifeworlds, she makes a similar case to the teacher who is unwilling to excuse a student's high rate of absences on illness related to parental heroin use. However, in making teachers' expectations pivotal in students' success and failure, the Principal produces another kind of cause–effect explanation, where teacher expectations, rather than the home, become the problem.

While the Principal worked to keep the school as a place for learning and teaching, from the teachers' points of view it often became a centre for crisis counselling:

> Often, with parents there will be some crisis, that's *their* crisis, that you've got to get pulled out of the room; or [the Principal] will come and say, 'So-and-so's suicidal. Can you come to the office and Sr C will take your kids'. And Sr C was supposed to take J's kids, so therefore J can't go anywhere and that also makes people angry, when we're all tired. You think, bloody hell how many more times is this going to happen? Which means your tolerance for kids like V and J just goes. Sounds grim doesn't it?

> The mother rung up sort of a bit suicidal and [the Principal]was straight around there like a shot and spent a few hours there in the morning. But that was a real shock to me because I thought why did the mother ring the school.

Indeed as the teachers suggest, parents frequently called on the Principal for assistance with relationships, disputes and personal life crises and she always made the time to see them. However, from the teachers' points of view, such crises belong to the parents: 'that's *their* crisis'. According to the teachers, this is not the business of the school. The implication is that the school should focus on the child's problems, not those of the parents. The effects of these 'interruptions' from parents in crisis are seen as disruptions to the school program and teachers' plans, which makes the affected teachers angry and thus their tolerance for problem students low.

In the second case, where the Principal went to the home of a supposedly suicidal mother, the teacher questions why the mother rung the school. Personal and family problems become teachers' and Principal's work. The implication here is that the parents are calling the wrong agency. The Principal's readiness to become involved in the community is seen to create problems for teachers. Parents come to threaten what goes on at school, not only through producing chaos in the home, but bringing that chaos to school through direct requests for help. The teachers' use of 'so-and-so's suicidal' and 'sort of a bit suicidal' is hard to read. On the one hand, the gravity of the situation from the parent's perspective is signalled. On the other hand, reluctance on the teacher's part to see it as a school problem perhaps indicates her scepticism. Again the themes are repeated: family chaos - school order. The need for division between family and school is restated. Hence, for this teacher, parents' lives are not (or should not be)*school* business.

Yet teachers see what's going on at home as impinging directly on the child:

> When everything has been chaos, the children are wild...If there's something going on at home you can pick it; children are very good thermometers for what's happening.

> They're really only in school for a very little time. When you look at the rest of the time. Then I looked at the hectic lifestyles they lead and what sort of support structures are in place for homework and reading, about taking pride in their work and you know taking pride in their handwriting. All those sorts of things are my values. I also looked at the way they actually curse each other, the way they set each other up, the way they manipulated each other, the way they really show... (inaudible)... about each other and the lack of sense of humour. And I question why there would be such a lack of sense of humour and it's very difficult for some of these children to laugh at themselves and to laugh with, not

> at, so we laugh at and not with. I thought. Well you know, a sign of someone who's really healthy and the mickey can be taken out of them and really good emotional health. And so eventually I talked to [the Principal] about what I was thinking and feeling [about child abuse and family violence quoted above] and she absolutely jumped down my throat. She said it was a very dangerous thing to think about and to consider.... But these children are like that, they are only doing what they know and what they know so well in their lives.

In these statements, teachers explore the effects of 'home' on children at school. One teacher suggests that chaos at home makes children wild, and that their school behaviour can be seen as a thermometer by which things going on at home can be detected. Here the family is pathologised and the 'home' is viewed as a place of chaos which produces 'wild' children.

In the second statement, another teacher recalls her thoughts about children at home and at school. She begins by pointing out that children are in school only a little time, by comparison with their out-of-school time. This sets the scene for her conclusion that support structures for homework and reading and pride in work - her values - are absent in the home, where 'hectic lifestyles' are the order of the day. 'Hectic lifestyles' euphemistically softens the chaos and violence theme spoken about on other occasions. Next, she moves to her observations of how the students treat each other: cursing each other, setting each other up, and manipulating each other. Here the students are not only seen in opposition to her values but in conflict with each other. Problematic peer relationships become the site of the teacher's gaze. From these observations, the teacher concludes that the students lack a sense of humour, that their behaviours indicate that they laugh at, not with, each other. The teacher interprets this perceived lack of a sense of humour and related behaviour as the sign of a problem: as she puts it, 'a sign of someone who's really healthy and the mickey can be taken out of them and really good emotional health'. The implication is that these children do not tolerate having the 'mickey' taken out of them!

Her next move is to hypothesise from the collected signs and interpretations that the children in her class, or at least a percentage of them, are suffering some form of abuse or violence in the home. In these statements the teacher lays out how her thinking has proceeded. I repeat this sequentially to spell out the propositional links being made and the interplay of discourses in producing pedagogical solutions.

Proposition 1. Children are in school for a comparatively small amount of time
Proposition 2. Children lead hectic lifestyles at home
Proposition 3. There is no home support for literacy activity
Proposition 4. There is a clash of home values and teacher values
Proposition 5. Children display anti-social behaviours to peers
Proposition 6. Children lack a sense of humour
Proposition 7 Children lack emotional health
Proposition 8 Children are abused at home
[Counter proposition 1 Assumptions of child abuse and family violence are dangerous]
Proposition 9 Children do what their parents do

In Proposition One, the teacher makes the seemingly self-evident observation that, compared to the 'rest of the time' (out of school time), children are in school for only 'a little time'. There is a binary division between school and home time, though home is implied rather than stated at this point. In Proposition Two, the teacher contends that the children lead hectic life styles and she connects this to Proposition Three which is implied, but not stated, that no 'support structures are in place for homework and reading and taking pride in their handwriting'. In Proposition Four, she acknowledges a clash between her values and those of the home. In Proposition Five, the teacher reports as though it is uncontestable that the children in her classroom curse each other, set each other up and manipulate each other. In Proposition Six, she claims that students lack a sense of humour. Up to this point, her interpretations and judgements are reported as thought they are the result of objective observations, as the facts. In Proposition Seven, there is a shift in that she reports her analysis and the resulting diagnosis of this series of problems. All of the previous data becomes evidence for the proposition that children lack emotional health.

Her next move, Proposition Eight, is to theorise that this is caused by abuse in the home, a theory which she reports she has taken to her Principal and to which the Principal has responded with a counter proposition and a warning. Undeterred, she maintains her position that the problems the children in her class exhibit at school can be traced to 'their lives' – in other words, to their parents. Across these interconnected propositions, the teacher's judgements of children's family lives, literacy practices, peer relations and emotional health are framed as though they constitute unquestionable professional knowledge.

Drawing on educational, psychological and legal discourses from a middle-class position the teacher constitutes the child as deviant and their parents as the objects of blame. 'These children are like that, they are only doing what they know and what they know so well in their lives'. Through this series of interrelated statements, innuendo and euphemisms the teacher constructs the students in her class as problematic. She moves from her judgement of lack of literacy related supports and attitudes on a roller coaster series of hypotheses, which culminate in her conclusion of domestic violence as the cause of children's being 'like that'. Thus children who have different values than their teacher's are constructed as the victims of abuse. As the Principal argues, this is 'dangerous' thinking! Teachers' intellectual bricolage ensures that:

> [T]he explanatory categories to which they will appeal will be those provided by sensory perceptions, a ragbag of commonsense or taken-for-granted beliefs and folk psychology...For example some teachers are inclined to explain comparative lack of academic achievement in working-class schools in terms of extraordinarily unsophisticated deficit theories (Hatton 1988, p.341).

Faced with these children, teachers working in a complex and diverse community draw on commonsense knowledge of a social problem to explain what confronts them in the classroom.

In making reference to child abuse, the teacher reported above turns to social science explanations from the popular press to understand children's classroom actions. Here we see how 'the sociologists' words contribute to creating the social world' (Bourdieu 1990, p. 54) by providing classifications, theories and vocabularies which impact on the teachers' everyday perceptions and practices. Committed as she is to working in a disadvantaged school, to making these children literate, she nevertheless has problems dealing with behaviour and values which conflict with her cultural and class position. Her response to perceived 'differences' in the classroom is recourse to adjacent professional discourses in order to help her solve the problem which her own practices construct. Hence children's social interactions and behaviours are diagnosed as evidence of a deeper problem, a lack of emotional health, which must have an underlying cause ('child abuse'). Here, popular psychology and media reports of abuse and violence come together as the teacher reads the classroom scenarios which face her. It is not that the teacher is not well meaning or caring of these children, but that the discursive resources available to her construct the child, family and community as chaotic, violent and threatening. In her search for an explanation of her students' perceived differences, she slips easily from judgements about literacy in the home to

violence in the home. Such a response is not unique to this teacher nor this school, but rather is part of a wider 'poverty discourse that conceals economic and educational inequalities, state induced destitution' (Polakow 1993, p.146).

Conclusion: Working against deficit discourses

At Banfield, the beginnings of a potentially counter discourse could be detected in teachers' talk of student 'difference'. However, the language of 'difference' offers no ready-made deficit-proof alternative and may even mask dangerous constructions of the student subject, whilst at the same time occluding explicit analyses and programs relating to class and material poverty which, as some argue, is part of a wider trend in the social sciences (Coole 1996; Skeggs, 1997).

Educational researchers need to examine the effects of our own vocabularies in public discourses and in local educational institutions, and to work on generating new vocabularies for understanding how different young people take up what schooling makes available. Otherwise we risk unwittingly propping up the discourse of the dominant, 'the discourse of those who think everything goes without saying, because everything is just fine as it is' (Bourdieu 1990, p. 52). How to scrutinise and rebuild the research thesaurus is not obvious. My first step is to examine the texts I produce with, and alongside, teachers in the name of research. This includes consent forms, survey, interview protocols, fieldnotes, descriptions and interpretive work.

It also means actively working *against* authorised texts which strategically marginalise materially disadvantaged groups whilst ostensibly offering a solution. Luke argues that contemporary 'conservative educational projects' contribute to what he describes as 'the return of the deficit subject in new times' (Luke 1997, p. 17). Minister Kemp's recent forewarning that federal funding may be tied to students' literacy performance and his insistence on 'No excuses!' (thereby making arguments about the effects of material disadvantage on educational outcomes, non admissible) could be considered as a case in point[8].

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[8] See Comber, Green, Lingard & Luke (1998) for an extended discussion of current Commonwealth literacy policy and educational disadvantage.

The problem of 'background' in researching the student subject is crucial at this time. The dominance of literacy assessment in the Coalition government's policy, programs and funding formulas (with similar trends to be noted internationally) has occurred simultaneously with the demise of explicit equity-driven agendas. Students' different lives and material resources could be considered to have been deemed insignificant in contemporary educational equations – well and truly 'backgrounded' – for instance, in the repeated demand for similar literacy outcomes. The task then is to develop ways of understanding students' lives, as practiced and experienced, which *foreground* inequitable material circumstances, but which avoid the dangerous effects which have sometimes accompanied 'background'. If we are indeed in 'new times', what might we learn from 'old times' about what to foreground, in researching the development of different young people's repertoires of literate practices? This would include a sustained ethnographic and longitudinal research agenda which allows for more than snapshots and surveys. Such data would require analysis about the contingent relationships between individual histories, literate practices (in homes, communities, workplaces and schools), present life-worlds, educational environments and possible future trajectories (Bourdieu 1990; Skeggs 1997). Among other things, accounts of such research would cull current vocabulary, which all too often indicates discursive throw-backs to limited positivist categories and their attendant dangers. More positively, such accounts would struggle with new language, which specifies new kids, new times, new literacy, in ways which might assist teachers in their work and also in ways which ensure that significant differences between students, such as those associated with poverty, do not go without saying.

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